November 17, 2009

Provost and Vice President Susan Phillips
Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
University Hall, 308
University at Albany, State University of New York
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12222

Dear Provost Phillips:

I have received a memorandum titled, "Online SIRF for Fall 2009" (Appendix A) which was sent to me (and to other faculty) by the Office of "Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness" on Friday, November 13, 2009.

As I will argue in the following pages, the memorandum is a requiem for the pedagogy of ideas at the University at Albany. It is the quintessence of the anti-intellectualism that now dominates this University and has reduced conceptually demanding teaching to the management of affects and feelings. The pedagogical unconscious of the Memorandum encodes practices that have led to the University at Albany being ranked behind all of its three comparison groups (peers, applicant overlap peers, Carnegie peers) in all five significant domains of knowledge and teaching, namely:

1. level of academic challenge
2. active and collaborative learning
3. student-faculty interaction
4. enriching educational experiences and
5. supportive campus environment

("National Survey of Student Engagement, Spring 2008")

Given the importance of the issues involved, I would like to suggest that you consider appointing a task force to analyze the philosophical assumptions and pedagogical consequences of this Memorandum and to draft a discussion paper for thinking about teaching and the modes of understanding and evaluating teaching at the University. I suggest that the task force have nine (9) members, and since its conclusions will have the most immediate impact on untenured faculty, they need to be clearly represented:

a. Four (4) untenured (tenure-track) assistant professors;
b. Three (3) tenured permanent (i.e. non "visiting") associate professors;
c. Two (2) tenured permanent (i.e. non "visiting") full professors.

The response of the University Administration to this Memorandum and the questions it raises about research and pedagogy at the University will be constitutive, I believe, of its very "identity" as a public "research" university whose purpose is to produce boundary knowledge and intellectually rigorous pedagogy for all citizens.

"Online-ing" teaching evaluations at the University at Albany is a symptom of the dominant anti-intellectual culture of "service" in which intellectual inquiry (the "why" of thinking) is reduced to a vulgar pragmatism (the "how" of management). In a university of ideas—where thinking is not an optional extra to "service" and the classroom is not marginalized by the committee room—knowledge would not be instrumentalized and innovative, transgressive thinking and teaching would not be repressed by a computational rationality.

In fetishizing computational reason, the University not only debases students' intellectual work by evaluating it through the crudest means ("filling out a form"), it also humiliates its faculty by subjecting them to a coarse numismatism that measures the effectivity of their knowledge-teaching through the grid of SIRF: "Student Instructional Rating Form."
What epistemological absolute determines the pedagogical "rating" of SIRF?

Numerical evaluation is justified by the University as an "objective" measure of an "objectivity" (teaching). SIRF, however, is merely a simulacrum of objectivity. Objectivity is not a static empirical given—the priority of object-matter. This view of objectivity is based on the assumption that the object is objective and therefore can be measured in equally objective terms ("numbers" in SIRF). Objectivity, however, is not an "itself"—immanence—it is a dialectical social relation determined by the "outside" of the historical material conditions of its production. This is one of the reasons the "objective" understanding of the "objective" world constantly changes—what was represented as "objective" (immanence) at one stage of social production is demonstrated to have been merely an arbitrary coding of the "objective-object."

SIRF is an arbitrary coding. It is based on the computational reason produced and legitimated in the contemporary culture of the market(ing). The function of a university is to resist market rationality not to adopt it to measure its most important practices—research and pedagogy. Embracing market rationality has trivialized the intellectual practices at the university and turned its teaching evaluations into mere consumer surveys, which is telling of the way the University approaches pedagogy and treats its students.

SIRF’s "objectivity" is an alienated objectivity whose authority is obtained through a formal protocol. It is a dead objectivity and has no epistemological hold on the historical social reality of teaching. What SIRF measures is the fetish of the affective, just as market(ing) surveys measure the affective relationship of consumers to commodities. SIRF scores rate students’ affects—their "likes" and "dislikes," their feelings—about a particular mode of teaching. They turn pedagogy into a commodity and situate the student as a consumer. To be more direct, SIRF is without any epistemological validity because it cannot explain the "why" of these "likes" and "dislikes"; all it does is repeat (not explain) the grip of the affective. It cannot go beyond the circle of desire.

Cynical reason will ex-claim that nothing can. But cynical reason is the twin of instrumental reason: one obtains the required ideological effects by affirmation, the other through the power of the negative. Both are produced by the metaphysics of market(ing). A teaching evaluation that cannot conceptualize "why" students like or dislike a course (why different courses are received differently) and go beyond pedagogical platitudes is conceptually bankrupt, and a conceptually bankrupt account of teaching cannot claim objectivity. To put it differently, what SIRF represents as objective has no objectivity outside its own network, which is another way of saying its objectivity is formalist and closural, a blockage of pedagogy-as-history. I have analyzed these issues at length in my book, The Task of Cultural Critique (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009: 69-96), as well as in my (co-authored) "Hypohumanities" (a book chapter in Class in Education, London and New York: Routledge, 2010: 39-65).

Displacing conceptual and analytical work (teaching) by a zone of affect (teacher-ly) produces pedagogical mediocrity. The task of serious teaching is to teach the difficult and conceptually complex. Teaching the difficult distances students from their familiar "experiences" and places them in a space of uncertainty, which is the primary condition of change toward a new mode of knowing and even knowledge. Serious teaching, above and beyond its local subject (algebra or modernist architecture), foregrounds the limits of a student's "experience." It contributes to his recognition that what he has come to accept as his living experience and treat as the threshold of reality (the guarantee of Truth) is not given by an objective reality but is the encoding of that reality by a particular imaginary relation to it. However, such a pedagogical distancing often brings with it the dis-affection of students, which is one of the two affective values measured in SIRF. A risk-taking pedagogy of transformation causes dis-like and thus fails in SIRF's computations. In contrast, a re-familiarizing pedagogy of self-assurance succeeds because it causes the teacher to be liked. SERIF lets the affective set the scene of pedagogy because it cannot explain teaching; it computes its affects.

Given the economic conditions and the contemporary social divisions of labor, few teachers are prepared to put their reputations (and consequently their careers) on the line by taking intellectual risks in
teaching since such a bold pedagogy often causes them to be dis-liked and their teaching is being evaluated by a binary logic (SIRF) that measures likes/dislikes as signs of effective/ineffective teaching.

SIRF inhibits defamiliarizing and intellectually demanding teaching.

To change the norms and support rigorous teaching that takes intellectual risks, SIRF has to be abandoned and replaced by an explanatory essay in which students (free from the pre-determined questions of SIRF), slowly and thoughtfully discuss and analyze the teaching situation in its totality. Teaching evaluations, I repeat, need to be freed from the pre-set questions of SIRF: what epistemological absolute gives SIRF’s “questions” authority?

These are not abstract questions.

As I indicated in my Memorandum of 12 April 2009, in one of the recent courses I have taught, I received a letter from a student who was not just unhappy with my teaching difficult texts but who also thought that my teaching difficult texts violated the norm-al practices at the University at Albany. She/he wrote:

“I stopped to work on another paper that was supposed to be due this Wednesday for another class. I chose to prioritize this paper because the last time both classes had papers due, I prioritized your paper to the detriment of the quality of my other paper. I received a B+ on that paper, which was deserved. I received an 80 on your paper, which was infuriating. I will not make that mistake again.

My issue with this class is as follows: Throughout my academic career, I have based my strategy for academic success (and by that I mean getting good grades) on finding out what a teacher expects, and doing my best to match/mirror that in my assigned work. So far it has been a pretty rewarding strategy. In your class, it has not. First of all, the assignments that you have given are completely ridiculous, for lack of a better word….the assignments are completely ridiculous in that they require far too much material, too many complex ideas, and not enough space…. I spent hours every day on my vacation reading the same few pages of Habermas (and this was just a dialogue, not his actual writing!) until I gave up... Essentially, I constantly feel like this class is a losing battle for me. I just want to be able to get a good grade.... I am an intelligent senior in college, and I tried my best to do what I thought you wanted on the last paper, to no avail....So, I wanted you to understand where I am coming from with all of this...”

The student is a senior who has not learned to read a relatively complex text (by Habermas) in four (wasted years) of his/her “education” at the University at Albany. Within the anti-intellectual culture of the University, she/he is not only not embarrassed by his/her lack of conceptual literacy but also thinks it is the course’s fault for trying to teach conceptual thinking. It is the course’s fault, in other words, to have put the student in this untenable (uncertain) situation where she/he has to actually learn to read a text that is by no means very difficult and to write on what he/she regards to be complex ideas. To read difficult texts and to engage complex ideas is to her/him a waste of time and, more importantly, is ruining the goal of his/her “education,” which is to get good grades. In other classes, the student implies that she/he reads simple texts and writes on simple issues and gets good grades. In other words, this course is an anomaly in its difficulty: a “ridiculous” entity in the student’s educational universe, which is constructed for him/her by the practices (of other courses) at the University at Albany.

Her/his anti-intellectualism is not innate or natural. He/she has learned it at the University at Albany and been rewarded for it with high grades. The student’s entire four years have been spent in courses taught by non-ridiculous teachers who evidently substitute easy thinking and easy readings for substantive analytical texts. A close reading of the NSSE survey shows that the intellectual alienation of students and their lack of thoughtful engagement grows as they progress in their studies (from their first year to their senior year). In fact, the University at Albany itself claims that the intellectual quality of its students is constantly increasing (“Getting Smarter All the Time: The Freshman Class” by Greta Petry, September 12, 2003). So much so that the University issued the following announcement about its entering class of 2008:
The University at Albany boasts an incoming freshman class with high academic standing, reflected in the students' mean high school grade point average of 90 and mean SAT/ACT score of 1150 – 130 points above the national average.

In other words, students begin their "education" at the University at Albany with a high degree of intellectual curiosity. However, owing to the actual teaching practices at the University and the way teaching is evaluated here, they gradually lose the intellectual interest and idealism that they bring to their first year studies because they see more and more clearly through the pedagogical games that often masquerade here as teaching. What happens to students who enter the University with "SAT/ACT scores that are "above the national average" and after four years at the University can not read a slightly complex text? They are de-educated here.

The student from whose letter I quoted is not alone in complaining about being asked to do serious thinking and rigorous writing, and the situation is not limited to undergraduate education at the University at Albany. It is worse on the graduate level.

When as chair of a Ph.D. examination, I asked a graduate student to re-do what she/he had written and re-submit a more thoughtful and conceptually thicker examination project, he/she wrote to me and complained that she/he had asked around and no other graduate students that he/she knew had ever been asked to do similar difficult work:

"It seems that nobody I have spoken to has the same qualifying examination or dissertation process. When I asked some people what kind of questions they asked, they hadn't even proposed questions... And though I certainly don't expect everyone to have the same experience, I am surprised at the breadth of difference in the process."

These are not exceptions but merely the most recent cases.

The consequences of substituting the "teacher-ly" (the affective) for "teaching" (the conceptual) can be demonstrated rather easily. Most teachers at this University receive "above average" evaluations by students. If this was an objective evaluation of teaching, then the outcome should also be objectively "above average." This, however, is not so. According to most reports and evaluations, the effects of teaching at the University at Albany rank it lower than its peers. The University does not figure "above average" in national surveys. (Kiplinger's Personal Finance gives the University a high ranking, but the basis of its rankings are essentially financial ["affordability"] not intellectual.) The question thus becomes: how do so many "above average" teachers produce ordinary teaching effects?

The "mystery" of "above average" teachers who produce lower results nationally for the University at Albany becomes less mysterious when one examines the grading at the University. Most students here receive "above average" grades. This seems to point to the fact that in numerical evaluations students give their teachers more or less the same grades that teachers have given them. This is not an objective evaluation; it is a scene—with all the stock characters and themes—of a pedagogical commedia dell'arte.

Refusing to substitute a comedy for the teaching evaluation, one teacher in the humanities at the University at Albany has commented on the absurdity of this practice:

"This is a humanities course that I am teaching and thus is 'interpretive' and should be evaluated interpretively not numerically,... I understand... that a primary concern from the perspective of the administration in putting this form in place is that they have an "objective" measurement of faculty "performance" that will be convenient to use for the purposes of tenure and promotion reviews. Leaving aside the problems with the assumptions underlying the idea that "numbers" means "objective," I think this perspective leaves out of consideration the needs of the students for a free space to discuss their thoughts about the course and thus their education. Of course I realize that the students are to be told that if they have ideas they wish to write, they can put these down on separate paper. However, this is in addition to the numerical form, which is given the priority by
the administration (students must fill out this form first, then they can write their thoughts). ... Again, I think this does a disservice to the university's students in the name of what is ultimately a matter of convenience (letting the administration off the hook of evaluating complex work in a complex way so they can simply "add up numbers" in order to evaluate the faculty's teaching).

To break the circle in which teachers (under pressure from the institutional codes that relate their promotions to their students' evaluations) repress their rigorous teaching and grade students unrealistically high and, in turn, receive unrealistically high evaluations, the University at Albany should end its numerical evaluations (SIRF) of faculty and instead require, as I suggested at before, that all students at the end of semester write an analytical essay on the teaching situation. The explanatory essay—unlike a robotic marking of a sheet of numbers—has a unique quality. An essay conceptualizes issues and, therefore, shows the frame within which evaluation is done: it shows the underlying assumptions by which the writer has evaluated the course and whether the student is focused on the teacher or on teaching. It makes the text "say" its "un-said" assumptions: unlike SIRF, it explains (regardless of the writer's "intention") "why": why the student likes or dislike a course and in doing so situates the course in its conditions of production, and not merely in the writer's immediate affects. The affective does not disappear but will write itself side by side its conditions of existence.

The university does not need the false objectivity of numbers. It needs first-rate teaching.

Numerical evaluations not only do not have any objectivity, they perpetuate the myth of objectivity under whose cover grows mediocrity and anti-intellectualism. Popularity rather than scholarship becomes the measure of a "good teacher." It produces a mode of teaching that is closer to "therapy" than analytical teaching.

Rigorous teaching does not affirm a student's existing ideas and feelings. Rather, it defamiliarizes her position to herself so that she moves from where she is now (comfortably) located to what is a more thoughtful, complex, and nuanced (although uncomfortable) situation of knowing.

The farcical and devastating dimensions of numerical evaluations of teachers becomes even more clear when they are applied to the humanities. Throughout the semester, a humanities teacher teaches the importance of complex thinking and a thoughtful qualitative approach to the world, a tolerance of ambiguity and an honoring of the subtle and the difficult. However, at the end of the semester, the University asks the same students to go to online terminal and mark numbers on a form to evaluate the course. In effect the University forces the student to forget all that she has been taught throughout the semester and use the crudest form of thinking (marking "values" on a table of numbers) to evaluate the most subtle form of human practices—teaching the imagination to imagine.

This is a mockery of pedagogy; a cynical administrative laugh at thoughtful teaching.

"Onlining" the evaluation of teaching is not an isolated operation at the end of the semester. It is part of a process by which teaching as a critical inter-action among students and the teacher is gradually reduced to re-acting to signs on a screen. As I have discussed at length elsewhere ("E-Education as a Class Technology" in Class in Culture), onlining pedagogical work is integral to the class politics of the contemporary general public university whose function has become training the middle management of the workforce of global capital. Onlining the evaluation of teaching is another stage in rearticulating pedagogy through exchange-value by adopting business management models for teaching and automatizing the classroom. The onlining of teaching evaluations is the pedagogical equivalent of buisness "market research."

The class politics of onlining pedagogy is clear when one considers the fact that elite schools (in which the upper management of business and government, namely the "cultured" controllers of the working population are trained) emphasize critique-al give-and-take among students and the (actual) teacher in small classrooms (the enrollment in most undergraduate courses in the English Department here is 40—compared to 15 or so in elite universities and 25 in advanced research universities). The
University at Albany, under the guise of deploying "cutting-edge technologies," is "virtualizing" teaching by increasingly confining student education to re-acting to signs on their computer screens, thereby isolating students and de-socializing learning. The classroom which should be an active place of critique-al dialogue is being gradually replaced by detached cyber-re-act-ivities.

Teaching evaluation is part of teaching practices; it is not a separate re-action. It should therefore take place in the same "actual" classroom in which the student has been working with the teacher throughout the semester. It should not become an autonomous "virtual" operation.

To take teaching evaluation out of the same classroom and make it autonomous distorts it because it changes its analytical character and, as the practices on such commercial sites as "RateMyProfessor" show, makes it purely affective. It is course telling that through online evaluations, the university comes face to face with its commercial twin in the market.

In actual practice, most participants in online ratings are from two groups of students:

1. The "fans" of a teacher who have nothing but absolute praise for her/him;
2. The online "flamers" who vent their personal anger against the teacher.

The majority of students have no interest in participating in what they see to be basically a means for employment decisions by the administration.

Teaching evaluations should be a pedagogical practice—a slow, thoughtful analysis of the pedagogical situation integrated into the class session in the form of an essay without any pre-set questions. It should be analytical not computational, discursive not numerical, and should give a thoughtful account of the semester's work in its totality. The main goal of a teaching evaluation is to contribute to improving the teaching situation not to provide distorted and distorting data for hiring and tenure decisions by the university administration.

I repeat my suggestion that you consider suspending the online evaluation that according to the Memorandum of Friday the 13th is planned for Fall 2009, and instead appoint a task force to analyze the complex issues involved in the evaluation of teaching and to offer new modes of understanding and evaluating teaching at the University.

Sincerely,

Teresa L. Ebert
English Department

Copies:
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Interested Faculty
From: "Laura L Benson Marotta" <LMarotta@uamail.albany.edu>
To: "Teresa L. Ebert" <te609@albany.edu>
Sent: Friday, November 13, 2009 12:09 PM
Subject: Onine SIRF for Fall 2009

Teresa Ebert,

The university's Student Instructional Rating Form (SIRF) system is moving to the web this fall. I am writing to let you know your specific section(s) that are slated by your department, school, or instructional unit to have an online SIRF course evaluation.

AENG210 LEC 18556 Intro to English Studies
AENG485Y LEC 32458 Topics in Cultural Studies

Since class announcements serve to both inform students and increase response rates, I would like you to make an announcement about online SIRF in class. Your students will begin to receive e-mail invitations to the survey Monday, November 23, with details for student participation noted in the talking points below.

You may check your section's response rates by logging into the course evaluation system via MyUAlbany. I will be sending step-by-step instructions of how to check response rates in a separate e-mail.

As always, if you have any questions concerning the SIRF survey please feel free to contact me.

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Class Announcement for Course Evaluations [to be announced in class by the instructor]

1. Beginning Monday, Nov. 23, this class will begin a web-administered course evaluation. We will no longer be using the "pink bubble sheets" you may have seen in the past.

2. As with the paper evaluations, your participation is completely voluntary, but essential to providing your perspective of this course and its instruction.

3. Students can get to the web evaluation by logging into MyUAlbany, and clicking the Evaluate Courses link under the Special Announcements area of the Academic portal page.
   a. This will then take you to an evaluation page for this course, which is run by Digital Measures, a company providing a secure web service under University contract.

4. You will also receive e-mail reminders in your UAlbany e-mail account from "UAlbany Course Evaluation/Digital Measures" with subject line "UAlbany Course Evaluation Invitation." The e-mail will contain a link that puts you into MyUAlbany and the Academics page where you can click the Evaluate Courses link.

5. The evaluation survey will close at the end of Reading Day, Tuesday, December 8, but please do it as soon as you receive the survey announcement.

11/16/2009
These evaluations are administered by the UAlbany Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness. Your responses will be reported only as part of a pooled data set that the department chair and I will review after grades are posted.

Neither the survey administrator nor I will be able to know how you responded as an individual - But I will be able to monitor the overall class response rate between now and December 8, Reading Day.